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UNDP: COUNTRY COOPERATION FRAMEWORKS AND RELATED MATTERS

Implementation of the human rights component of the first country cooperation framework for Belarus

Note by the Administrator

1. The Executive Board approved the first country cooperation framework (CCF) for Belarus (DP/CCF/BLR/1) at its annual session 1997. At the same time, the Board also requested that an information note be submitted at the annual session 1998 on the implementation of the human rights component of the framework.

2. Belarus is currently at a critical juncture in its transition from a centralized form of government to a decentralized, democratic society. Owing to historical, economic and other factors, there is little understanding of the new role that civil society and the mass media are expected to play in this endeavour. UNDP, jointly with the Government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), relevant United Nations agencies and donors, has formulated several projects to support the country's efforts to promote democracy through strengthening civil society institutions and enhancing popular participation.

3. It is expected that by the end of the period of the first CCF (1999), the role of civil society in Belarus will be more clearly identified, including through greater awareness about human rights and the role of free media, access to modern means of communication, the improvement of psychological and social attitudes towards people affected by HIV/AIDS, and greater awareness about women's roles in the overall development of the society.

4. The human rights component of the framework was included in the CCF under the thematic area of governance. In this context, the Government requested that UNDP, with the United Nations Centre for Human Rights (UNCHR), assist in the

establishment of a human rights institution, thereby creating sufficient capacity to apply international human rights standards in the country, thro Parliament, government agencies and civil society. National activities wou linked to the regional programme on democracy, governance and participation

5. In May 1997, a preparatory assistance document was signed by UNDP to c out activities in the field related to human rights, pending the signing by Government and UNDP of a project document for strengthening capacities and infrastructures for the promotion and protection of human rights. Within t framework of preparatory assistance, the following activities took place: (a) participation of three representatives of the Government in the Third U International Workshop on Ombudsman and Human Rights Institutions, held in Latvia, in June 1997; and (b) support to the mission of the UNCHR Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opini and Expression, and facilitation of its contacts with Belarusian representa of the Parliament, the Government, mass media and NGOs (May-June 1997).

6. In July 1997, an informal meeting was held at the UNDP country office Belarus with representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the meeting, an understanding was reached that it might not be expedient to pro immediately with a project aimed at the establishment of a human rights institution. Instead, it was suggested that a revised project should be prepared, focusing on raising public awareness about human rights issues.

7. Towards the end of July 1997, a meeting was held in the UNDP country o with the Head of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee. Following the meeting, was agreed to reformulate the proposed draft human rights project, with the assistance of an NGO active in the area of human rights in Belarus. During October and November 1997, a new project was formulated, combining the prop from both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Belarusian Helsinki Commi

8. In December 1997, the revised project proposal was submitted to the Un Nations Centre for Human Rights in Geneva, Switzerland, for review and comme A decision regarding project funding by the United Nations Centre for Human Rights, which had committed $90,000 to the original project, is pending. In meantime, the Government of Belarus has on several occasions reiterated its interest in the reformulated project.

9. Aside from the projects and activities discussed above, a number of oth endeavours are under way in the areas of human rights and good governance, a in support of the development of the role and capacities of civil society in Belarus. Specific fields of involvement include promotion of the use of the Internet, support for the independent media, and the establishment of a university centre devoted to the promotion of human rights.

10. A project to strengthen the national information and communication infrastructure in Belarus through the Internet is aimed at connecting 200 NG in order to promote an open society and participatory development. The proj document was signed by UNDP and the Government in June 1997, with a substant amount of cost-sharing resources from the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute. Currently, more than 150 organizations have been connected to th

Internet under the project, either on a dial up or a lease line basis. Training and assistance in creating websites are also provided through the project.

11. A project document for support for the mass media was signed by UNDP and the Government in February 1998. The project will provide training in the role of free media in a democratic society through a Swedish NGO. That organization is also the main donor to the project, which is being implemented in close collaboration with the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists.

12. A Centre for United Nations studies, devoted primarily to the promotion of human rights issues, is being established within the Belarusian State University. The project document was signed by the Government in February 1998. The project also receives major financial support from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The Centre will host seminars and workshops on various human rights-related topics, such as human rights and refugees, human rights and AIDS. The main beneficiaries will be education institutions and NGOs.

13. In January 1998, UNDP and the Government signed a project document for the first fully NGO-executed project in Belarus. With most of the funding provided by the World AIDs Foundation in Paris, the project aims at increasing the level of HIV/AIDS awareness and responsible sexual behaviour among the population.

14. A project aimed at promoting gender equality was successfully completed in December 1997. The main achievements of the project, involving many women's NGOs, include the establishment of a Gender Information and Policy Centre, newsletters and publications on the status of women in Belarus, and numerous practical workshops on such issues as women's rights in a post-totalitarian society and women's self-employment on former military bases.